UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Radio Service
OFFICE OF INFORMATION

CHATS WITH THE WEATHER MAN

Friday, April 28, 1933.

FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY

ANNOUNCEMENT: And now for our chat with the weather man. We read the weather forecast every day. We see and hear the same terms used over and over again. But do we have a clear idea of just what those terms mean? Well?--

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The old song says it is always fair weather when good-fellows get together.

But, of course, the weather man doesn't make his forecasts in any such convivial spirit.

The dictionary defines "fair" as clear and cloudless. On the other hand, some folks regard the weather as "fair" so long as it doesn't rain. They speak of the day being "fair" when the sky is completely overcast with clouds.

Neither of those is exactly the meaning of the word "fair" when it appears in the official government forecast you most often read in the upper corner of your newspaper or hear quoted over the radio.

When the U. S. Weather Bureau's forecast says "fair" it means that no precipitation; that is, no rain, or snow, or sleet, is expected; but the character of the sky may range from clear to partly cloudy.

When no precipitation is expected, and the sky is expected to be free or nearly free from clouds, the forecaster uses the word "clear." When no precipitation is in prospect, but the sky is expected to be overcast with clouds, the forecaster says so. He uses the simple, straight-forward word "cloudy" to define the expected condition.

If he judges that the sky will be overcast, but that there will be occasional breaks which will last considerable time, he uses the words "mostly cloudy."

And when the indications are that there will be no precipitation, but some cloudiness, he phrases his prediction with the term "partly cloudy."

So you see each term in that weather forecast has a very definite meaning all its own. The forecasts have to be short and to the point, and so the same definite word is used regularly to describe the same sort of expected conditions. Of course, there is not much chance for us to go wrong in interpreting such forecast words as "warmer" or "colder" or "local thunderstorms" or "fog" or "cold wave" or "light frost" or "heavy frost". They speak a language we all understand.

But E. B. Calvert, chief of the forecast division of the United States Weather Bureau, tells me that the Weather Bureau often gets inquiries as to the exact meaning of some of these other terms we have been talking about.

We have mentioned "fair" and "clear" and "cloudy" and "mostly cloudy" and "partly cloudy". Then there is the expression "generally fair". The forecaster uses the term "generally fair" usually when he is referring to relatively large areas, such as a whole State, or half a State. When he predicts "generally fair" Calvert points out, the forecaster has in mind that there will be some variation in cloudiness and possibly some light precipitation in scattered places, but over most of the area the sky will be clear to partly cloudy.

When he predicts "increasing cloudiness" he expects the sky will be clear or partly cloudy at the beginning of the forecast period, becoming overcast by its close; or, the sky will be nearly overcast with thin, high clouds at the beginning of the period and intermediate or low clouds will develop before its close.

Of course, you know our weather forecasts are for definite periods. Those issued in the morning from all the district forecast centers are for 24 hours, divided into two periods of 12 hours each. The first period begins at 8 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, of the day of issue, and the second begins at 8 a.m. and runs to 8 the next night. When the weather man says "tonight" he means from 8 p.m. until 8 o'clock in the morning. And when he says Friday, he refers to the period from 8 in the morning Friday to 8 at night. In local forecasts, you may notice forecasts issued on week-day mornings for "this afternoon." But the weather man's afternoon extends from noon to 8 at night.

The forecasts issued in the evening are for 36 hours, beginning at or just before 8 o'clock the next morning. They are not for as closely-defined periods as those issued in the morning. They refer principally to daytime conditions, except in cases where "night" is specifically mentioned.

But to get back to the weather words; "unsettled" doesn't refer to the state of mind of the forecaster. When he says "unsettled" he has a pretty clear idea that there will be considerable cloudiness and threatening weather, with very little, less than two hundredths of an inch of snow, or rain, or none at all.

But maybe we should explain what "threatening" weather is. It certainly isn't clear. To the weather forecaster, "threatening" refers to a sky overcast with dark, lowering clouds, but under such conditions that he does not think it likely that there will be rain or snow, or other precipitation.

The weather men prefer to use that word "precipitation" because it takes in any and all forms of rain, snow, sleet, and the like. When he says "rain" he means rain that lasts a comparatively long time, not just showers or occasional rain.

Intermittent rainfall of comparatively short duration he refers to as "showers" and rainfall at infrequent intervals but not prolonged he refers to as "occasional rain".

So it is with snow. When the forecaster says "snow" he means snowfall that will keep up for some time, not just occasional snow, or snow flurries. If he thinks the prospects are for snowfall at infrequent intervals and not prolonged, he words his forecast "occasional snow" and if he finds the indications are for very light and intermittent snowfall, the term he uses is "snow flurries."

Another thing folks often get mixed up on Calvert says is "sleet" and "glaze". Sleet is precipitation in the form of small ice pellets produced by the freezing of rain in the free air. Those pellets are dry, you know, and do not cling to anything in falling. "Glaze," on the other hand, is that ice coating formed from rain freezing on objects in a very shallow layer of cold air, the temperature of both the air and the objects being below the freezing point. A deposit of glaze on an extensive scale is called an "ice storm," but that term is not used in forecasts.

"Probably," and "probable," and "possibly" are words you sometimes see or hear in the forecasts of precipitation, but they are not such weasel words as some folks seem to think. "Probably" or "probable" signifies that, in the judgment of the forecaster, precipitation is very likely to occur. "Possibly" indicates uncertainty, but that precipitation is more likely to occur than not.

Another term that sometimes raises questions is the term "Clearing." That term is used by the forecaster when precipitation which will take place in one 12-hour period is expected to end shortly after the beginning of the next forecast period, and to be followed soon thereafter by broken clouds or clear sky.

Speaking of clearing, however, I hope that this helps clear up some of the doubt in some folks minds about the terms used in the daily weather forecast. Anyway, look at the forecast in your papers, or listen for the exact wording as given over the radio with this idea of the definite meaning of the terms in your mind. It may make the forecasts more meaningful for you.

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ANNOUNCEMENT: You have just heard a chat with the weather man on weather forecasts and their meaning, as explained by E. B. Calvert, chief of the forecast division, of the United States Weather Bureau. We will have another of these chats with the weather man two weeks from today.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

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